

History piece on Saints of Kashmir: Shakar Sahib aka Shakar Shah Padshah

[approx. 1794 to 1830]

The author of this piece on Shakar Saheb is Late Shri Prem Nath Bakaya, IAS son of Shri Jia Lal Bakaya]. Shri Prem Nath Bakaya was a direct descendent of Sat Ram Bakaya [elder brother and guardian of Shakar Sahib who had no children.]

Our family's eminent spiritual legend, Shakar Sahib In our joint family we, even as children, were encouraged to have faith in some widely acknowledged saints. It started with an ancestor of our Bakaya family called Shakar Sahib. We were told about him as part of the Bakaya family folklore. He had been popular for his spiritual powers and some noteworthy events. In fact there were many stories of his miracles. The family maintained some of his relics in a pooja (worship) room in our Kanikadal home on the bank of the Kutakul stream which had branched out from the river Jehlum.

One of the stories was about an arrogant governor who ruled over Kashmir as representative of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (Maharaja of the Sikh empire 1780 to 1839). It was said that the governor took frequent tours in the city of Srinagar as a part of his inspections. He used a large boat driven by twelve sturdy rowers. He liked the sound of their rhythmic rowing; he was known by Kashmiris as Kripa – Shruni (Lover of the sound produced in perfect unison while his boat was rowed). It was said he was going in that boat, one day over the Kutakul stream. His boat could not proceed beyond the point at Kanikadal, where Shakar Sahib lived. He urged his team of rowers to proceed. They did their best but the boat did not move. He was enraged; he started scolding them. But one of the boatmen who knew of Shakar Sahib dared to stand up to suggest that they should land and pay respects to the saint. It was a practice for passersby on the boats to say "Shakar Shah Padshah" (meaning Shakar Sahib is king). The arrogant governor felt there was no option, he agreed and was taken to visit the saint. He greeted him. Shakar Sahib spoke, "It is good you came; there is a bad news, people feel you are a good ruler but a complaint has been made to the king in Lahore, you are being called and a different governor is being sent to Kashmir. You should go, explain your position. The king will be convinced and you will come again. Have faith in God almighty. Do not be arrogant, you can go." The governor was taken aback. He became pensive. He went back to his boat which started moving. It was said this prophesy came true after about a month. He was summoned to Lahore to be reprimanded by the King – Maharaja Ranjit Singh. He was able to explain his conduct. The king asked him to wait for his decision as his dismissal was possible. After a few days he was summoned again and told the complaint was found untrue and he would be sent to Kashmir again. But he was

directed to be humble while governing with strength and strictness. After I grew up I read in a history book that one governor Kriparam was the king's representative who was in Kashmir in 1819 was recalled on some complaint but cleared and deputed for a second term. The history book did not mention about the Saint's warning and prophecy but this was part of our family folklore which was full of many other stories of Shakar Sahib's miracles. It was said that as a child he was precocious. He mixed freely with all boys of his age – both Kashmiri Hindus and Muslims. Once his Muslim friends bought a cooked mutton mince delicacy (harsa) from a street shop. He felt 'tempted' to taste this too. His Hindu companions complained to his mother that he had outraged his religion. His mother was sad, called him over and reprimanded him sharply and said he had despoiled himself and started crying. He was upset and pleaded with his mother that there was nothing to worry as all the boys were brothers there was no difference between Hindus and Muslims but she was disturbed. He assured her that he would cleanse his stomach. So he was reported to drink glasses of water which he excreted after an hour or two it contained the stuff that was said to have cleared out and off. It was said that to reassure his mother of his purity, he vomited out his intestines into the river, washed the intestines with the river water and swallowed back his intestines. Shakar Sahib's parents forced his marriage to a young pretty daughter of a wealthy Kashmiri Brahmin, Dilaram Mandal. He resisted but was overruled and the girl joined the family as a favorite daughter-in-law. The story goes on when the girl was pushed into his room for the first night, she felt that Shakar Sahib was in deep meditation and was surrounded by a circle of very bright light. She felt endangered and could not stay on. She cried and ran out. She told her mother-in-law who was amazed, but consoled her and asked her to not be afraid but should try again next day. She could not summon the courage but she helped her mother-in-law to serve Shakar Sahib. But when she entered his room she thought she saw a snake surrounding him. She reported her experience to her own parents and her mother-in-law, who also saw a snake. Her father felt it was a mistake but was convinced that her daughter may be destined to be a serving disciple of a budding saint. He used to visit Shakar Sahib on his birthdays and present him a nice Pashmina Shawl (a warm soft wool wrap) every such day and wrap it over him. It is said, Shakar Sahib, by this time had accepted a Muslim disciple. This gentleman would take over the shawl and keep it safe in his possession while Shakar Sahib looked quietly on unconcerned. When on the third or fourth anniversary the wealthy father-in-law (Mr. Dilaram Mandal) put yet another shawl around Shakar Sahib's body, he offered his respects and left. The Muslim disciple started removing the expensive nice wrap. Shakar Sahib stopped him and said - "No, you have received back all the value of the amount I owed you as a repayable debt in my earlier birth, now onwards this will be given over to someone else deserving it." The message in this episode is there is a limit in every relationship imposed by karma on what you owe and what needs to be repaid. Shakar Sahib's guru was Mirza Kak Sahib and we often visited

Kak Sahib's Samadhi, the place where he was cremated on the banks of a beautiful stream a few kilometers from Kokernag on the way to Anantnag/Srinagar. In the Bakaya family we lived with these delicious but inspiring stories and always remembered the heritage of an inspiring spirituality. While we were growing, we were encouraged to join our elders' visits to the third storey small room used as the family's prayer room. The room was small but enriched with precious Souvenirs of our family saint, revered Shakar Sahib. A part of the headgear turban he had worn, a small notebook packed by a tiny sized writing of 'RAMA- RAMA' in Hindi letters, a little stick usable as a help to lean on while holding a prayer book and a worn out pair of wooden clogging which Shakar Sahib used for walking outdoors. We enjoyed the rhyme and rhythm of the hymns either Sanskrit or Hindi or even Kashmiri that the elders recited with devotion. We could remember some of the easier ones but we were attentive while the recitation was going on. The Puja – worship and prayers was a daily routine - led either by my Dad or uncle Nandlal or uncle Jejkak. This time period of half an hour to 45 minutes was very quiet and elevating. This routine daily exercise created a curiosity in me and my cousin sister Sona three to four years elder to me and we talked it over and decided to find details about Shakar Sahib. So one day the two of us approached the eldest living member of the family, NandLal's mother Vishimaal. She told us she had not seen Shakar Sahib in person but heard many legends about him and his spiritual prowess. She said that Srinagar, at that time had a number of saints, many of them used to visit Shakar Sahib to pay respect to him. She had heard that one saint, Labi Shah who lived mostly at Tulamul (Khir Bhawani) shrine used to tell everyone "Kashapani Kashiri Mastana Setiha, Shakar Sahib chhu Sahibi Dasgah" which means, in Kashmir there are a number of Saints, Shakar Sahib has lot of power. This made Shakar Sahib known and many people visited him to pray for his favors. A Muslim lady from the neighborhood used to visit Shakar Sahib, to help serve him she told him she was very poor, she had no house of her own. Shakar Sahib asked her to walk with him in the neighborhood. He took her and they walked over around an area then he suddenly stopped and told her she would own this piece of land and have a house of her own. She felt this seemed impossible and asked him "How could this be? The land belongs to a rich man and I have no money to buy" The saint smiled and told her this was what "God willed". After a few days the owner of the piece of land, who had lost his wife about a year ago, sent a message to this lady whether she would agree to marry him. She was aware that she was a poor woman, while he was quite rich. She felt this was not possible but the man repeated the offer. They married and constructed a house on that plot of land and he gifted this house to her while they lived there as husband and wife. Veshmal told us that she had heard of some stories of miracles performed by Shakar Sahib. She said the saint was approached by his neighbors to save them from an epidemic of cholera which had appeared and caused lot of panic, as a result of some deaths. He told them he would pray to God and asked them to walk with him from his house in Kani Kadal to

Sathu, while he continued to pray in silence. It was found that the entire area was saved. No case of cholera occurred in that large area. In another instance, a relative of Bakayas living at a short distance was frightened when a house near his caught fire and had started moving in the direction of his house because of the strong wind. He ran to our house and took a holy relic, a Takhiti, a flat piece of wood on which the Saint had written "RAMA RAMA" and held it against the wind. He said that the fire changed direction and his house was saved. Veshmaal's Dad said he was a personal witness to this miracle, while the saint was not personally living. I came to see an article written by someone whose name was not written there. Actually the K P Journal "Koshur Samachar" issued one or two issues exclusively covering stories about the many Saints and spiritually advanced Gurus (Teachers) who were very popular in Kashmir over a period and some who were living. I could not get access to the issue of that main journal which mentioned Shakar Sahib but the one printed journal I received seemed an auxiliary journal called the "Khir Bhawani Times" the issue was dated Jammu 1998. The article in this journal was purported to be written by one member of the Bakaya family. He has mentioned some instances of miraculous powers of Shakar Sahib related to him by a cousin, one Mr. Radhakrishan Bakaya. These seem to be stories of unbelievable character, but the world of saints and savants is believed to be extraordinary. For instance it says Shakar Sahib's mother was scared when she saw him cross over the flowing kutakul with his wooden clogging in his feet or when he would climb a standing wooden pole. He is stated to invite other Saints and savants and entertain them, provide food on certain occasions and sometimes tea. Usually he remained silent and absorbed in meditation, feeling comfortable in their company. One story recites an occasion where Mr. Dilaram and his family took Shakar Sahib to Khir Bhawani - something happened and he felt upset and just walked away. They tried to stop him but he started running and did not stop. After some days he was found to have reached village Khrew, quite a distance, where another saint, Jeevan Sahib, resided with his disciples. The saint was expecting another saint to come over and asked his disciples to prepare to receive him. He arrived and saint Jeevan Sahib embraced him. His disciples asked who he was as they saw their Guru very excited and overjoyed meeting him. Saint Jeevan Sahib told them that in their previous birth both of them were co-disciples of a great Guru and he (Jeevan Sahib) was the elder one, and the time came for him to give up his body, he prayed to his Guru that in their next birth both of them should be born in places near each other so they could continue to meet and advance their spiritual career together. He told them that the great Guru had obliged and now he was expecting him to meet Shakar Sahib. After few days the story goes Shakar Sahib was told by Saint Jeevan Sahib that Shakar Sahib's wife was very ill and nearing her death. He told him he should go and see her at Srinagar. Shakar Sahib reached Srinagar and went to the cremation ground where his father and brother Hemant had brought the dead body. He told his brother to perform the funeral rites

treating her as his mother. His brother agreed and Shakar Sahib stayed on till the rites and the cremation ended. Then he went to stay in the Kanikadal house. After sometime he is said to have gone to a village Batagund near Sopore where he had two of his disciples one Shankar Lal and another Hyder Ali. He saw Hyder lying unconscious taken for dead but he called him, then he put his own cap on his head. Hyder woke and stood up to pay his regards. Shakar Sahib is said to have given up his body when he was just 36 years old. As I have said already, we in the Bakaya home used to attend the daily puja performed every morning by our elders. I recall that we felt very peaceful and happy. Whenever anyone in the family faced any problem, he or she visited the room and meditated, focusing on his memory and the holy relics. Doing this made them forget their worries and could feel the tension dissipate. My wife Parma lost both her parents when she was in her 20's and used to cry for them for several years. She felt a presence of Shakar Sahib as a young boy consoling her. We used to pray to him for success in exams and other important occasions including marriages in order to receive his blessings.